

Contractor doctor: how can I deal with an overseas agency who won't pay?

Dear Contractor Doctor,

Last month I mobilised for a Belgium-based recruiter from my home in the UK to their Dutch client project based in Cairo, Egypt, for what was to be a 6-10 week short-term assignment. However after only ten days on site of continuous 12-14 hour-a-day duty, and authorised by the client, I returned to the UK for two days for personal reasons.

During my absence the Dutch client in Cairo unexpectedly terminated my services and I was told not to return. Obviously under the circumstances I could not have my timesheet signed.

I have demanded pay from the Belgian agency, but they insist that I supply a signed timesheet, although they are well aware that obtaining one was not possible under the circumstances. I still have personal property in Cairo which has not been returned.

I have been a contractor on overseas assignments for many years, but I have never experienced this kind of treatment before. What should I do?

Yours sincerely,

Vincent Corbett

Contractor Doctor says:

When you contract overseas with agencies in foreign countries, you do have some protection. There are industry organisations for contractors and temporary agencies in all the nations of Western Europe. These will act on your behalf in cases like this.

In this case, your contract is with a Belgian agency, so it is to the Belgian trade organisation [Federgon](#) that you must apply. The full name for the Brussels-based trade group is, in French, Federation des Partenaires de l'Emploi (Federation of Partners for Employment, a temporary agency group).

Federgon has a permanent mediator who does nothing but to deal with cases like these. They will issue an opinion about the case, and if they rule in your favour, Federgon will pressure the agency to pay you, and to retrieve your belongings.

We spoke to the mediator at Federgon about your case, and, while he cannot comment on it without a full investigation, he did say that you seemed to have the basis of a legitimate claim. He looks forward to hearing from you about it, and you should let us know what happens.

But UK-based contractors should in general try to assure themselves of better legal protection when they do overseas contract work. There should be clauses in your contract which demand British jurisdiction over it, and which state how any dispute should be resolved. Countries like Belgium do not have the effective civil courts that the UK boasts; a civil suit in Belgium could take years and cost far more than your contract was worth. Contractors should be advised that when they work abroad, they need to see that their contracts have safeguards against non-payment and breach. Take advice if necessary, but don't get on a plane without it next time.

Good luck with your contracting!

Contractor Doctor

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